MAY WE HOPE

FOR

A GREAT REVIVAL?

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WITHIN the last twelve months (1867) the Church of Christ in America has been visited with an extraordinary quickening. For once the embankments by which religious matter is shut out from the channels of secular intelligence were broken in; and even daily papers teemed with accounts of revivals and conversions. This great event has not been without its effect upon ourselves. Aspirations after a similar work of grace which existed before have been awakened afresh. On every hand good men may be heard asking one another, "May we hope for a great revival?" Some, it is true, not less desirous of the extension of Christ's kingdom than others, shrink from the idea of a revival, lest it should be attended with extravagance, and bring forth none but ephemeral fruit.

Some months ago two Ministers of the Gospel met on the top of an omnibus within a few miles of this city. Their conversation soon turned upon the remarkable news weekly coming from the religious bodies of America; and one of them expressed a hope that we might witness something similar amongst ourselves. The other replied, "I have no faith in revivals; they do not leave any permanent results. Many years ago in the city of E—— I witnessed what appeared for the time to be a very powerful revival, but in a little while all the fruit of it had passed away." "In the city of E——?" rejoined his friend. "Several years ago,—was it about the time of the first visitation of the cholera?" He learned that it was. "And all the fruits disappeared?" "Completely," was the reply. "It's strange," he said, "that in a distant mission field I knew two Missionaries, both of whom had been converted in that revival."

What do we understand by a great revival?

Why should we desire it?

Why may we hope for it?

1. WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY A GREAT REVIVAL?

Through God's mercy to this country it has been blessed with a great revival in each of the last three centuries. In the sixteenth, when Christianity was almost dead, a Divine breath passed over the land, and then arose that great revival of doctrine and life which we call the Reformation; the indirect effects of which touch every department of our social and moral life, and its permanent embodied result

is seen in the Established Church. In the seventeenth century, when a period of worldliness and decay had succeeded to the first life of the Reformation, arose the great Puritan revival, of which the indirect effects powerfully influence our pulpit and religious press to this moment, and its permanent embodied result is the community of orthodox Dissenters. In the eighteenth, when a few good men, thinly scattered here and there, were lamenting the general decay of piety and frightful corruption of manners, the great revival of the last century sprang up, of which the indirect effects were an unprecedented quickening of every branch of the Church, and its permanent embodied result is the Methodist body throughout the world.*

Each of these three revivals was properly national. They did not affect a single neighbourhood, or terminate in a season. They pervaded the entire country, were sustained through a succession of years, and affected our national morals to the very core. It is impossible to estimate the collective effect of these three great revivals upon our nation generally in its character and position. Without them we should probably have been such a people as the Italians, destitute of their art. They have left no department of our social, intellectual, political, or moral life untouched; and the result has been a preparation of our race to carry out a beneficent mission on the earth, which leaves very much to be desired, but furnishes lively grounds of hope for the future prospects of mankind.

It is to be remarked that America shared largely in the benefit of each of these three great national revivals. From the first her middle and southern States received those religious institutions and means of grace, by which such men as Washington were trained up to give a healthy tone to the early steps of the young republic. From the second New England received its pilgrim Fathers, with those hardy Puritans whose sons have deeply impressed the character of the American Churches, and borne a glorious share in the toils and fruits of the present revival. From the third she received those itinerants who were the pioneer Preachers in all her new Western States, and the fruits of whose labor now constitute the most numerous religious body in the Union.

When, therefore, we speak of a great revival, we mean such a manifestation of the converting power of God, as shall mark a new epoch in the moral and religious history of mankind;—not the conversion of a few scores in this town, or a few hundreds in that city, although over these we should rejoice, and so would the angels too, but a pervasive, national quickening, reaching into every parish, going into the centre of society, striking its highest and its lowest extremes, and carrying forward the cause of vital religion as far in advance of its

* See a valuable paper by Rev. T. R. Binks, in the volume called, "The Religious Condition of Christendom."

position at this day as the revival of last century and its results have, up to this time, carried it beyond the position it then occupied. But in speaking thus, what do we say? Were the professors, the agents, the resources of true religion now found amongst us multiplied as greatly as those which existed just a hundred years ago have been since that time, how far should we be from the entire conversion of the United Kingdom? With this century of blessing behind us, and the arm of our Redeemer above us, who will have sufficient hardihood of unbelief to say that what hath been shall not again be.

It is probable that if the Lord is pleased to visit us with such a blessing as that which He has showered upon our sister Churches, the course of the revival will deceive all our expectations. It may set in from a quarter, and cut out for itself channels, which none of us could or would have fore-arranged. Of the many thousands in America whose frequent prayers were offered up for such days as their happy eyes have now witnessed, there probably was not one whose imagination had ever pictured the little prayer-meetings of the "Young Men's Christian Association," the mid-day gathering of merchants, the united supplications of Christians of all denominations, the strange blending of primitive freedom with solemnity and order, of lay action with ministerial joy, and fruit, and power, which form the peculiar signs whereby the present movement has been distinguished from all that preceded it. With us it is very natural to expect that when the great tide sets in here it will be in a similar direction, and flow in similar channels; but He who alone can bless delights to show us His sovereign power by divers operations of the same Spirit. Most probably the course and form will be something different,—may be entirely different. What, if our national pride in greater propriety and order should be rebuked by the permission of extravagances which have not occurred elsewhere? What, if once more the Lord should humble all existing instrumentalities by raising up some new and unwelcome one to do the work? These are points on which we know nothing, and for which we need not care, leaving the form, and course, and peculiarities of the revival to be be dictated alone by Infinite Wisdom, and guided by Almighty power. Let us, just as we would seek bread for the hungry, or rescue for the drowning, earnestly cry for the substance of the revival, and leave all the rest unthought of. By the substance of a revival we understand an *increase of life in the members, of power in the services, and of fruit in the labours of the Church.*

As the life of Christians depends altogether upon the Holy Spirit, so does it revive or decline in proportion as they are, more or less, under His Divine influence. When He is shed down from above, those who were living but a cold and inert life soon become like men breathing a new atmosphere. A very dear friend of mine from New York, speaking of the state of things during the revival, said, Nothing struck him so much as how easy it was to preach. It seemed as if one

had only to go into the pulpit and begin, and he preached as he had never done before. I have no doubt that while the Minister felt thus as to preaching, the people felt precisely the same as to living. An American poet has said, speaking of a glorious June day, —

> "It is easy now for the soul to be true,
> As for grass to be green, or skies to be blue;
> It is the natural way of living."

Now this, when applied to bright skies and green fields, is nonsense. Eminently fitted as they are to call out the finest tones of a soul already well tuned, the history of men proves too well that they have no moral power whatever over one whose passions are disordered. The names of Spain, Italy, Egypt, and Africa, are quite enough upon this head; but it is totally different when the true spiritual element of man is shed upon and around him, and the Divine breath flows into his soul insensibly, and with spiritual power. Then, when the Spirit is poured out, as Joel prophesied, and as the pentecostal Christians experienced, the servants of God seem to breathe their native air; men who before languidly supported a certain kind of religious existence, are borne along over their daily temptations as upon eagle's wings; the besetments of their temperament abate like ailments in returning health. They answer to the call of duties, whether in the family, in business, or the Church, with a joyful sense of help: and it is "easy" then "for the soul to be true."

This increase of life in the members is at once felt in all the services of the Church. What a change takes place in the singing! Instead of the heavy drone, or the stiff church music, or the scientific performance of the choir, you find a whole multitude from whom is pouring forth a living, bounding stream of musical emotion. You feel as if the heart-strings were all released from the benumbing entanglement of the flesh, and a wind from the Spirit was passing over them, and bringing out tones of unearthly depth and height which reach to your very soul, and make you feel that this is indeed melody to the Lord. And how different then is prayer! Heaven and earth seem to have come close together. You feel as if the hands of the great Daysman were uniting petition and answer; and even the ungodly, the unbelieving, the giddy, the self-righteous, cannot be present in the sanctuary without a something coming over them in such seasons of prayer which they know to be unusual; and which, unless they stubbornly and wickedly resist, they feel to be supernatural and heavenly. O! what moments have been witnessed when, in answer to effectual fervent intercessions, it seemed as if blessings were falling in showers on every soul around! And at such seasons preaching rises to its apostolic level; the trumpet of God sounds with redoubled shrillness, at times seeming to fortoken that trump at whose voice the dead shall arise: for, as blast after blast, perhaps loud, perhaps low, peals out from the lips of herald, dead souls start from their graves, leaving behind them the old and corrupt

encumbrances in which they have hitherto been buried, and commence in earnest to walk with Christ in newness of life.

This state of life in the members and power in the services of the Church is never unaccompanied with fruitfulness in her labours. Then mothers tell with streaming eyes how their wilful boys have begun to lead a new life; tried and broken-spirited wives begin to see their husbands strangely seeking God; men of cold and selfish temper are found with full eyes in the sanctuary, and with new benevolence doing good to their neighbours. It is then we hear of the proud becoming lowly; the churl, liberal; the wild, sedate and wise; and many a fair and happy transformation from sinful to Christian living, which, as it circulates in the neighbourhood, stirs some other heart to say, "Is it not time for me also to seek the Lord?" and thus Christian conversions go on spreading from day to day, until the number of the newly awakened is such as to make a perceptible impression upon the community.

This being the case, there inevitably follow scenes of Christian fellowship. In the Church's cold and stately periods, even believers can hold on their walk, such as it is, at a strange distance one from another, never interchanging the joys, fears, trials, and refreshments met with on their path to heaven, but each making his way as best he can, his only instruction being from the pulpit; his only fellowship at the Communion table. Not so when the Church is in a revival state; not so when the hearts of old believers are glowing with new love, when fresh converts intermingle with them, and the world is yielding trophies to the Church daily. Then the pulpit is more prized, the Communion more sacred than ever; but there are so many things to be said to the glory of God, so many answers to prayer, so many deliverances from temptation, so many joyful experiences of faith, and hope, and charity, that you might as well try to keep happy children in their father's garden from gambols as to keep these loving disciples from fellowship of heart. They will say one to another, "Come to me, all ye that fear the Lord, and I will tell you what He hath done for my soul;" and these tales form one of the readiest and most effectual means of Christian instruction, especially on the vital points of inward and spiritual life.

We said before, it was probable that the course of a great revival amongst ourselves would be different from that which has been witnessed in America, and we also think it probable that the issue of it would be different from that of any previous revival. In each of the three great ones before alluded to, we have shown that the permanent and embodied result was a separate denomination of Christians. Would this be so again? The first, the revival of the Reformation, witnessed in its progress not only wars, but the burning stake; the second saw conflicts of the sword, but the stake had disappeared; the third blessed the churches without any effusion of blood, provincial mobs and petty persecutions being the utmost extent to which violence reached; both stake and

sword were gone, but there was a terrible clang of polemical steel. May we not hope that the great revival of the nineteenth century will be free from polemical strife, and will not result in raising up another distinguishing name among Christians? that it will in fact be a revival of union? In America, its one distinguishing characteristic has been the revival of prayer and union; there all branches of the Church have rejoiced together, sowing and reaping in the same field, and none assailing his neighbour's barn or storehouse. And we may look forward to days in which the different sections into which the Church is now divided, each becoming holier, happier, humbler, will be liker its Divine Head, and therefore nearer to all the others.

II. WHY SHOULD WE DESIRE A GREAT REVIVAL?

In answer to this question, all the Christian instincts cry aloud. The progress of Christ's kingdom upon earth is so connected with the three leading motives of a Christian,—a desire for the glory of God, for our salvation, and for the salvation of others, that not a single feeling implanted in the breast by the regenerating Spirit can lie still when there is a prospect, even a distant one, of its marked advancement. How would love to God exult to see such a manifestation of His power and His grace, that the common talk of the town should be the great numbers who were turning from their sins to love and serve Him! How would every affection that clings to the Redeemer's cross rejoice at beholding entire companies of men looking on Him they had pierced, and mourning, each, with his eye fixed upon the atoning blood, crying, "Lord! remember me!" How would every heart that breathes after the communion of the Spirit delight to behold carnal and worldly minds yielding to His influence, and crying to Him to create them anew? That soul bears no kindred to angels that does not greatly rejoice at the very thought of a multitude of sinners repenting.

Our love to our nation would lead us to long for the time when the vices that flourish in our streets should disappear, not under the compulsion of the police, or Acts of Parliament, but by the purifying power of the grace of God reaching down to the lowest and unhappiest of our population. Then would the missions of England be well fulfilled among the nations, and, cleansed from her iniquities at home, she would go forth to carry the best blessings of earth and heaven, to all the countries over which she exercises influence. And as to our human race, that generation of it living with us now upon the earth,—what are the hopes that the overwhelming majority of it shall not spend all its little time here in sin, and go down to graves upon which no Christian hope shineth, unless the Spirit be indeed poured out upon all flesh, and converts, instead of being as solitary sheaves of first-fruits, come in with the sweep of a harvest? And our friends, that we have long known and loved, our kind and generous but worldly friends, what are our hopes of seeing them decided Christians if the Church languish on in what many consider her normal condition? And coming nearer

home; our own kindred, the sisters for whom we have long prayed, the brothers whom we have often feared to speak too much to lest we should do harm rather than good,—the children whose devious course we have followed with tearful eyes,—what is the prospect that ere we go hence we shall see every one of them ranged on the Lord's side, and taking their course to a better country? Ay! and our own souls too, how much are their interests involved in the prospect of a glorious revival? We are not so strong that when all around us is commonplace and cold, we can alone keep up to a level with the apostolical spirit. We are not able to breathe as if in the fellowship of John and Paul, to rejoice, and have faith, and triumph like them, when all around us are looking on *their* Christianity rather as some antiquated wonder than as the practical working religion for to-day and to-morrow.

Why should we desire a great revival? If for nothing else, for the joy of seeing a multitude of new converts. What children are in a family, or lambs in a fold; what recruits are in an army, or blossoms in an orchard, such are new converts in the Church of God. To them the experience and stability of advanced Christians are invaluable and even necessary, for instruction and confirmation; but O! to those who have for years been going through the dust and wear of pilgrimage, it is wonderfully helpful that ever and anon they should hear the ringing voice that sings its new song just caught from the heavenly Comforter, crying within the heart, "Abba, Father!" The new convert stimulates Christian fellowship by delighting to tell of his own new-found treasure; promotes zeal by his liveliness, and becomes the propagating power of the Church by the glorious instinct that tells him that what God has done for him He can do for every sinner living. When the newspapers were fullest of the American revival, they said that the number of conversions throughout that Union probably amounted to two hundred thousand. This in a population of 25,000,000 is not a very great proportion; and yet such is the level to which Christian faith in these days has sunk, that it filled us all not merely with astonishment, but with something very like incredulity, as if it could not, indeed, ought not to be expected.

The old question asked by the first man to whom our Lord preached regeneration, was asked again by hundreds who had known and felt what Nicodemus had not: "How can these things be?" and doubtless many a good man thought himself very wise when he set it down that of necessity this was wild exaggeration. It now proves that a single denomination in one section of the country—the northern States—alone counts for the year's increase 136,000 members; thus showing that when all the Churches put their sheaves together, original statements were far, very far, short of the truth. But suppose only half the number had been obtained, where is the good man who would not shed tears of joy to think of an army of 100,000 new converts glowing with the love of God and zealous for His holy cause? What hope for the

future here? How many future tradesmen, and labouring heads of families, to be a blessing in their neighbourhood, or in their trade! how many editors to give a healthy tone to periodical or newspaper literature! how many citizens to impress a Christian character on municipal or national politics! how many youths who will assuredly rise to the best and happiest of callings,—preaching the glorious Gospel of the blessed God; ay, and to the happiest branch of that calling,—preaching Christ where no man had ever carried His name before them! Every desire for an earth renewed in righteousness, for an age wherein a regenerated race shall dwell in amity and goodness under the reign of Christ; every desire, in fact, to see the image of heaven, mirrored back by the surface of this now dark and stormy world, stirs us up to cry, "O Lord, revive Thy work!"

But the feeling with which that prayer was coupled by the old prophet comes in upon us too. He said, "I heard Thy speech, and was afraid;" and surely we may well say so. We have heard His speech telling us that God is angry with the wicked every day; and we look abroad and around us on millions upon millions, and may well be afraid. You have heard his speech, saying that no adulterer, or drunkard, or covetous man, or liar, or extortioner, shall have any part in the kingdom of Christ or of God. Count up your acquaintances, and then can you avoid being afraid? You have heard Him say, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Look around you at church, think of the circle of your own friends, think of the millions upon millions of your nation, think of the judgment-day, and does not your very soul within you cry, "O Lord, revive Thy work, in wrath remember mercy."

III. Why may we hope for a great revival?

No Christian doubts for a moment that it is right to hope for some conversions; but it has become a popular belief, that it is eminently sober and wise not to expect them in large numbers. Many who would be distressed at the idea of not seeing one conversion in all England in the course of next year, would think it fanatical to speak of the possibility of a million. Why? Do they really believe that the great Redeemer has no interest in the million?—that it is indifferent to Him whether they live in sin or holiness; whether they become prepared for the inheritance above, or daily grow riper for everlasting woe? Do they believe that He has pleasure in sin, and the death of sinners? If not, why then should a feeling linger in their breast, that it is wiser and more sober to look to Him for the conversion of very few of His creatures, that for that of great numbers? They believe that if He wills to supply all with food, He will make the fields bring forth, not a harvest for a few, but enough to save all from want of bread. His solemn word, His special and peculiar oath, declare His purpose and desire not to be the death of any sinner: and the tears of His Son, falling upon

the path of the impenitent, roll back upon us the blame of the iniquities that are abounding.

Nothing can be more incorrect than the prevalent habit of conceiving of Christians as designed always to be a small and secluded portion of the race, leaving the great tide of humanity to roll on unchanged. The Spirit is to be poured out, not only upon some, but upon all flesh. Nations are to serve the Lord, and the Gospel is expressly sent to every creature. The little leaven is not always to be hidden, but to leaven the whole lump. The grain of mustard seed is not always to be small, but to become the greatest of all trees. The world is not to be a field of tares, with here and there a hidden stalk of true wheat, but a field of wheat mixed with tares, which you could not pluck up without danger to the all-pervading crop. The Lord has fixed one limit, and one only, to the conquering force and influence of His Church; and that is the limit of her faith. Christianity never did and never will prosper in the hands of unbelieving Christians.

As we dare not doubt the extent of God's willingness, let us open our minds to a sense of His infinite power. If you or I desired to-morrow morning to awaken London at a certain hour, our utmost effort could reach only to a few chambers, call up only a few slumberers; but when the appointed time of Providence comes for bidding sleepers rise, He will pour a light into every casement throughout all this city, which will touch the eye of each individual sleeper as well as if he alone were thought of. When the Lord wills to send a pestilence, he can spread a power through the air which affects whole multitudes in a day. When He would water our land, over field and garden, mountain and valley, north, south, east, and west, He sends shower after shower, until not one grass blade in the whole country has its root unwatered. And, O! when we think of a national revival, as if it was something too grand to be hoped for, which surely it is so long as we look to any power below the sky,—to men, books, or Churches; let us turn our eyes away from all these, up, right up, and say, "But IF THOU SHOULDEST WILL IT!"

Surely we may ask of Christians in a spiritual sense, what Paul asked of Agrippa in a material sense, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you that God should raise the dead?" that He should raise them in the twinkling of an eye, and in multitudes? Has He not given each man in the multitude a conscience? Does He not hold each man bound to stand in judgment before His throne? Does He not feed nations, and overrule the ways of the multitude? Did He appoint His Apostles and messengers to preach to the multitudes without the design of saving them?

Assured that it is the pleasure of the Lord to save, and that his power can reach "every creature," we may look for secondary encouragement to symptoms appearing in the Church and in the world. Among the most hopeful of these is a general longing felt by Christians

for a great work of God. We have all heard for years frequent complaints that conversions were few, and real religious progress slow. The Church, indeed, has not been dead; but, on the contrary, pressing forward works of charity and faith to an extent which in the last century would have been incredible. Yet this activity did not, does not, satisfy those who really live to God; they want also striking displays of saving power. For these, multitudes have been looking, and have often complained that it seemed as if "none of the men of might have found their hands." At this moment thousands are longing for "times of refreshing," praying, hoping, yea, we will say, believing for them. Let this continue, and, by the unchangeable laws of the kingdom of grace, the Spirit will be poured out from on high.

Has there not also been an increased effort for union in the different branches of the Church? Have not Christians, though slowly, been making observable progress in using their earthly goods, not as owners, but as stewards of the great Giver? Have not many, many heathen been receiving the knowledge of the truth from Christ's people? Have we not as a nation been humbled, afflicted, and proved by the Crimean and Indian wars, and by the commercial panic? Have not signs of progress appeared in the highest ecclesiastical and literary circles,—things being done by the foremost prelates which one generation ago were left to poor itinerants, and laughed at in them; and sentiments finding expression in letters, and even in leading articles, in powerful journals, which, within our own memory, would have been considered fit only for evangelical periodicals? Have we not several times seen daily papers containing such matter, that one enquiring, "What must I do to be saved?" might have found an answer in them? All these things are indications that God is preparing the public mind for a new and a great advance of true religion. Let us look on the American revival as but the beginning of a new era of national awakenings, and pray, and believe, and patiently but importunately wait for such a shower of grace as will make all Britain bear fruit abundantly, as will reach our neighboring Continent, and revive it also.

But is it not surer to advance slowly? Was it surer for the Israelites to leave masses of heathen in their borders for ages? By this they were led aside and overthrown. Was it surer for the early Church, when nations professed Christianity, that only individuals were truly converted, and the spiritual work went on slowly? By this she fell into half-heathenism, and many of her territories passed under the sword of the Mussulman. Are we on a surer path in making up our mind that the bulk of our neighbours must die in sin, than in longing, praying, toiling, that they may be all saved and brought to the knowledge of the truth, and believing firmly that these desires and efforts of ours are not in advance of God's goodness, but the effect of it? Let every one who is for advancing slowly, consider how much the cause of God has gained upon the world since his own conversion; and

then sit down and think how long it will take to convert the nation, not to think of the world, at the same rate of progress. Is it not time for God to lay to His hand?

But if a great revival came, might not fanaticism and extravagances arise? They might, and not improbably would. They have attended most great revivals. They may be expected in all cases where human agency is employed under powerful feeling, unless special control be exercised by the Spirit of all wisdom. But of what account at this day are the extravagances which attended the revival of the last century, while its benefits remain? If *we* are to be used as instruments, errors in abundance may be counted upon; but O, let souls be saved, the Church quickened, the nations roused with a mighty awakening, even though human infirmity display itself once more. At the same time each of us ought to pray that the Lord may save us from mingling folly with His operation.

Let us form no plans, set our eye on no particular Preacher, and shun everything like an effort to get up a revival. Let those who have been known as revivalists take care that they do not thrust themselves into view, that they show their faith by quiet and humble waiting upon God; and let those who have feared revivals open their hearts, and cry aloud, "Work as Thou wilt, O Lord, but work!" Let our whole plan be Union, Prayer, and Faith,—Union in which our sects shall scarcely be named, Prayer that rests not night or day, Faith that says, "It is to be," that will take no denial, and will count delay only as a call to renewed prayer. The sovereignty of God is never shown in setting aside an organic law of the Mediatorial Kingdom; our Father, "will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him." Heaven never cancelled, and will never disregard, this charter of praying Churches. But all promises imply, and our lord expressly teaches, that prayer must be importunate; must not faint with delay, or even positive discouragement. Day and night let us look with longing heart and hopeful eye for the Great Revival of the nineteenth century. It may be to-day, it may be to-morrow, it may be a year hence; it may come simultaneously on many points, or arise in one and slowly spread; its first manifestation may be in a grand cathedral with a mighty multitude, or in some room or barn; it may be at first chiefly in Calvinistic or in Arminian Churches; but let its time, form, and course be all left to Him, who alone can work. Let us only believe, saying, "It will be, it is to be." Let us only pray, "pray always, and not faint;" then, when, where, how he pleaseth, He will pour a vial in the air, a vial not of judgment, but of repentance; men will find themselves, they know not how, breathing a religious atmosphere, their consciences will awake with a cry, and they will turn to the people, to the messengers of Christ, asking, "What must I do to be saved?"